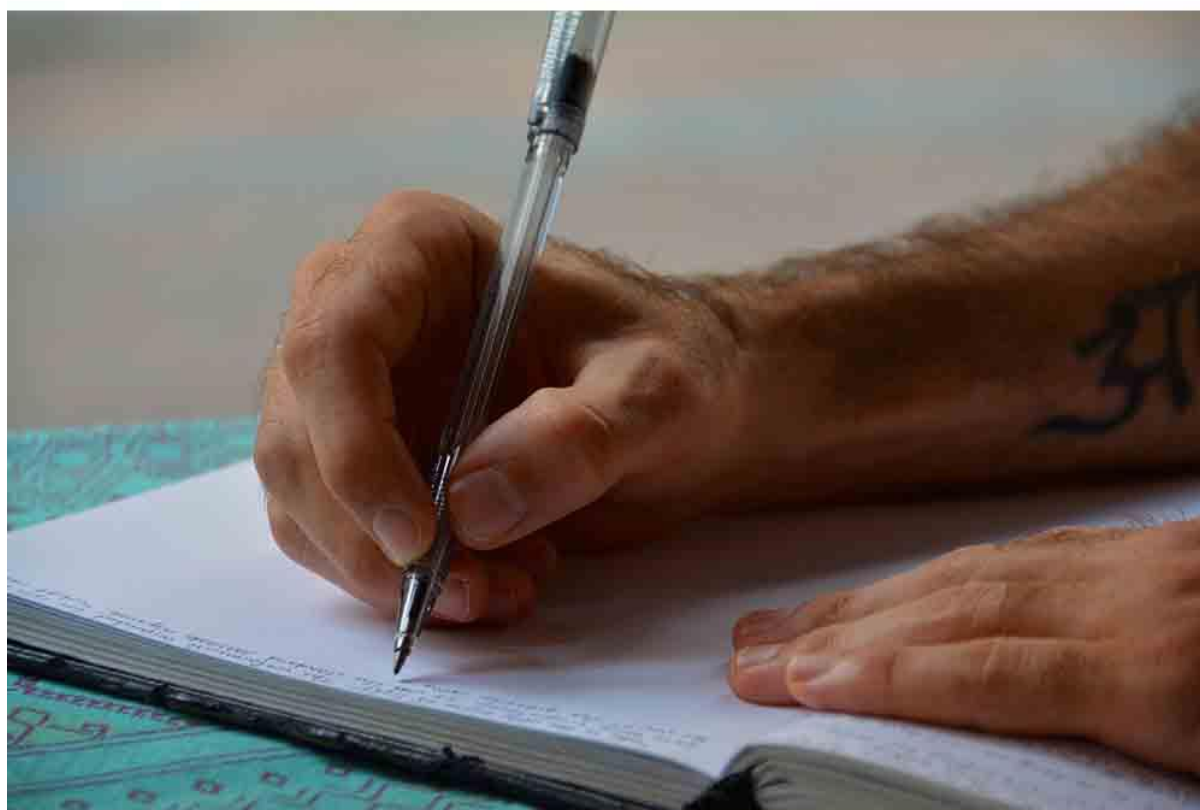


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Unlearning, the Key to Emancipation: A study of Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter*

Abstract

The Anthropocene is the story of how (Western) man has related to nature and to other men. With the original ontological unity of humanity and nature having been disrupted at some point in human evolution, man began to treat nature as the 'other'. With the onset of the Anthropocene, the central concepts of mainstream cultures are being interrogated for their deleterious role in bringing about cataclysmic environmental changes. In this context, Mahasweta Devi's novel *The Book of the Hunter* is highly relevant in that it problematizes such concepts of the mainstream culture as abstract knowledge, gender, class, nature, and transcendental god, by juxtaposing it to tribal culture which venerates and celebrates man's unity with nature and thus points to a way out of the impasse of the Anthropocene.

Key words: unlearning, spontaneity, communion, tribal wisdom, abstract knowledge

The Anthropocene is the story of how (Western) man has related to nature and to other men. With the original ontological unity of humanity and nature having been disrupted at some point in human evolution, man began to treat nature as the 'other'. Human culture, instead of being continuous with nature, in the sense of venerating and celebrating its reciprocal bond with nature and deriving its 'moral law from the starry heavens above', deviated into accentuating and celebrating its seeming separateness in the form of human

uniqueness. With the original nourishing contact with nature having been lost, man sought refuge and succour in gaining domination over nature through a knowledge of, and exploitation of, it. Human culture began to enshrine dualistic opposites like self vs the other, nature vs man, spiritual vs material, knowledge vs faith/experience, communion vs dominion and social contradictions like class and gender, which culminated in the emergence of the Anthropocene. The inexorable march of the Anthropocene has brought under scrutiny the values and priorities of the mainstream civilization for their deleterious role in precipitating the current ecological crisis that is unprecedented in Earth's history. The present paper explores the contrasting worldviews and the cultures of the mainstream society and the tribals, and attempts to analyse the novel *the Book of the Hunter* (1995) by Mahasweta Devi in the context of the Anthropocene, focussing on the problems that the mainstream culture created for itself, in the name of knowledge and institutions and suggests how the animist tribal culture's identification with nature can show a way out of them.

The Book of the Hunter fictionalizes the life and burgeoning of the poetic creativity of the medieval Bengali poet, Kavikankar Mukundaram Chakravarti, who wrote the epic poem *Abhayamangal*, where he describes the lives of the hunter tribe, the Shabars. In the novel, Mukundaram, a scholar and priest, is uprooted from Daminya, his ancestral homeland, and has to settle in an entirely new place, Ararha. There he comes into contact with the Shabars, whose freedom, spontaneity, trust, affection, basic honesty and a living nature religion attract him, and he unlearns his prejudices, complacency, formality and patriarchal attitudes.

The central theme of the novel is the protagonist, Mukundaram's struggle to find poetic inspiration to write an epic poem on the goddess Abhayachandi. The primary instinct of communion with Being and the other, which is the wellspring of poetic creation, is suppressed in him. He is unconsciously enmeshed in the mainstream society's traditional, patriarchal cultural perceptions and prejudices, which fetter his creative inspiration. They

come to the fore when he comes into contact with the tribals, the Shabars. He sees the tribal as the inferior other. His cultural imagination cannot go beyond the bounds of his own culture and see the truth and authenticity of the tribal culture and experience. In spite of his vast learning, he is still vulnerable to the typical prejudices of an ordinary mainstream male. He thinks Phuli, a Shabar woman, 'shameless' because she laughs loudly in the street, shows intimacy towards her husband, Kalya, holds his hand in public and addresses him in the singular *tui*(you). While his wife, Jagadeeswari, can feel gratuitous affection for Phuli, Mukundaram doesn't conceal his discomfort and displeasure with the spontaneous, uninhibited ways of that simple tribal woman. As a Brahman, he cannot appreciate the Shabars killing birds for eating and selling. He feels disgusted on knowing that they eat snakes. As a scholarly priest knowing Sanskrit, he cannot even imagine an uneducated hunter uttering the name 'Abhayachandi' and asks "Where did you *learn* this name?" (52) (emphasis added) On another occasion, Mukundaram explains about rain, using a Sanskrit sloka to his field hand Kalarchand and when he says he has already known that Mukundaram asks him "which pundit told you that?" (55) Mukundaram denounces upon learning that he has learnt from Tejota, a Shabar woman, saying, "That's not what we call knowledge," (55). Mukundaram is not ready to accept that an uneducated tribal woman can have 'real' knowledge. Despite his close contact with the 'uneducated' Ganesh in Daminya, who taught him the saga of the soil, he is still convinced that authentic knowledge is enshrined only in books written in the sacred language, Sanskrit. The narrator says, "Mukunda did not believe that a forest-dwelling Shabar could know much about anything. In his arrogance, stemming from the prolonged study of numerous Sanskrit texts, he believed that knowledge only came from the formal cultivation of learning. He was not conscious that he possessed this arrogance." (55)

For Tejota, as the Shabar chief, the purpose of knowledge is knowledge adjusting oneself to change. Her traditional wisdom along with her practical outlook guards her community and its values. Unlike Mukundaram, Tejota identifies with nature. The knowledge and rituals have not detached her from the people and their difficulties in the name of following traditions. Her knowledge is not an institutionalized one. So for her, knowledge means the keeping of the environment and people safe. Being a tribal woman, she has a living contact with her goddess. For her, their goddess is not a distant, omnipotent spirit, protecting and guiding them. She reprimands the goddess like she does a little child. At point, she chides Abhaya, who is represented in the form of a blue gandharaj creeper,

You were just fine in the banyan, now you have to come take up residence in this sal!

Well and good, but why have you suddenly decided to go off to a desolate forest?

You should stay right here as long as I live. Tejota is past those days, Ma, when she could go deep into the forest to guard your residence. (66)

Mukundaram is stuck in institutionalized religion and can't have such a 'living faith'.

He can see his goddess only in dreams, that too with difficulty in recognizing her,

he entered a deep forest he had never seen before. Some woman had beckoned him here. Now you saw the fluttering of her sari end, and now you didn't. you caught a glimpse of her hair one moment, and the next it had vanished. This moment you thought she was here and in the very next she was not. (65)

In the mainstream society, an institution gradually grows around a positive truth, experience or a need felt by an individual or society and becomes rigid under the influence of power and hierarchy, and begins to resist any necessary, creative restructuring. 'Knowledge' gives sanction to this process. It is a complex process of being civilized, which deprives the individual of an immediate, spontaneous and natural life. He is bound by ideology.

Explaining Althusser's concept of the function of ideology, Ashcroft says, 'social being' is constructed by ideology.

"Ideology is perpetuated, ... by ideological state apparatuses such as church, education, police, with interpellate subjects, that is, apparatuses that 'call people forth' as subjects, and which provide the conditions by which, and the contexts in which, they obtain objectivity." (203)

Althusser explains, ideological state apparatuses interpellate subjects, or the subject is the individual's self-consciousness, which is constructed by the institutions. Mukundram as a subject is constructed by the ideology formed by the state and Sanskrit education. The mainstream's ideological apparatuses are constructed by power relations, such as, king and subject; master and servant; husband and wife, whereas the tribal society is based on solidarity and equality. That is why Mukundaram is puzzled, being used to power and hierarchy in his own society. In contrast, the tribals are not victims of institutionalization and enjoy a free and spontaneous life. Mukundaram reflects on his own inability to experience such a life: "Everything was wild, unfettered and natural. ... they [Kalya and Phuli] would be dying to be with each other from one moment to the next. Mukunda watched that life as a spectator and had never had a real taste of it." (119)

The novel problematizes the mainstream idea of knowledge. It is a profound irony that the impasse reached by the scholar Mukundaram in his creative aspiration is caused by the inherent limitations of mainstream knowledge itself. Because knowledge in the mainstream tradition is a disconnected abstraction from man's direct sensuous experience of nature, it fails to present a true phenomenological picture of the world which implicates man's embodied reciprocal participation in the world. This distancing of nature from man results in abstract systematized knowledge which tends to forget its foundation and creates a privileged disembodied intellect which cannot see the Interconnectedness of things.

Explaining how the much valued 'self' is the effect of a rupture between the world and the knowing subject, David Abram in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous* writes

"It is likely that the 'inner world' of our western psychological experience originates in the loss of our ancestral reciprocity with the animate earth. When the animate powers that surround us are suddenly construed as having less significance than ourselves, when the generative earth is abruptly defined as a determinate object devoid of its own sensations and feelings, then the sense of a wild and multiplicitous otherness must migrate either into a supersensory heaven beyond the natural world, or else the human skull itself." (10)

Similarly, the lameness of thinkers insight about life is revealed by Wade Davis in his book *The Wayfinders*: "In the western tradition, existence is something to be contemplated. Our thinkers and philosophers step outside of life to discern abstract ideas that we define as insights" (158)

In the mainstream epistemological tradition, the Self is set against Nature, and knowledge premised on such rupture of the original ontological unity of humanity and nature lends itself to ideological use to serve the interests of certain social groups. As such knowledge conditions perceptions, it is very difficult for the advocates and users of such knowledge to see the limitations imposed by such knowledge on their own world outlook. No wonder, Mukundaram, the scholar's knowledge doesn't permit him to question the tradition that imposes outrageous suffering on the innocent widowed girl, Kadu. Mukundaram is conditioned by his intellectual tradition to believe that real knowledge is attained through a formal, intellectual pursuit. He cannot accept the knowledge gained without the mediation of a sanctioned authority.

In the novel, the Shabar culture redeems Mukundaram, the male representative of the formal, rational and hierarchical mainstream culture that has forgotten its roots in nature. The love of the Shabar couple, Kalya and Phuli, based on freedom, Kalya's mother, Tejota's communion with their goddess immanent in nature, Danko Shabar's reverence for all living things, and the Shabar community's intuitive nature philosophy, born of their identification with nature – all these instances of Shabar culture win the love and respect of Mukundaram. As a poet, he needed poetic inspiration, and the unlearning of his mainstream assumptions emancipates and nourishes his soul and inspires him to write his epic, in which he celebrates the Shabars as the free children of Abhaya Chandi.

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